

How an ex-Army commando became a terrorist

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ISLAMABAD: Once he was a blue-eyed boy of President General Pervez Musharraf. He got a cash award from the president for slitting the throat of an Indian Army officer in the year 2000 but after 9/11, he became a suspected terrorist.

This terrorist was Ilyas Kashmiri, reportedly killed in a US drone attack in North Waziristan last week. US officials claimed that Ilyas Kashmiri was a senior al-Qaeda commander and his death was a huge loss for the militants fighting against the foreign forces in Afghanistan.

Very few people know that Ilyas Kashmiri was a former SSG commando of Pakistan Army. He was originally from Kotli area of Azad Kashmir. He was deputed by Pakistan Army to train the Afghan Mujahideen fighting against the Russian Army in mid-80s. He was an expert of mines supplied to Afghan Mujahideen by the US. He lost one eye during the Jihad against Russian invaders and later on he joined Harkat-e-Jihad-e-Islami of Maulvi Nabi Muhammadi.

Ilyas Kashmiri was based in Miramshah area of North Waziristan where he was working as an instructor at a training camp. After the withdrawal of Russian Army from Afghanistan, Ilyas Kashmiri was asked by Pakistani establishment to work with Kashmiri militants. He joined the Kashmir chapter of Harkatul Jihad-i-Islami in 1991. After a few years, he developed some differences with the head of HuJI Qari Saifullah Akhtar.

Ilyas Kashmiri created his own 313 Brigade in HuJI. He was once arrested by Indian Army from Poonch area of Indian held Kashmir along with Nasrullah Mansoor Langrial. He was

imprisoned in different Indian jails for two years and finally he escaped from there after breaking the jail. His old friend Langrial is still imprisoned in India.

Ilyas Kashmiri became a legend after escaping from the Indian jail. It was 1998 when the Indian Army started incursions along the Line of Control and killed Pakistani civilians many times by crossing the border. Ilyas Kashmiri was given the task to attack the Indians from their back. He did it many times.

Indian Army killed 14 civilians on February 25, 2000 in Lonjot village of Nakial in Azad Kashmir. Indian commandos crossed the LoC, spent the whole night in a Pakistani village and left early morning. They slit the throats of three girls and took away their heads with them. They also kidnapped two local girls. The next morning, the heads of the kidnapped girls were thrown towards Pakistani soldiers by the Indian Army.

The very next day of this massacre, Ilyas Kashmiri conducted a guerilla operation against the Indian Army in Nakyal sector on the morning of February 26, 2000. He crossed the LoC with 25 fighters of the 313 Brigade. He surrounded a bunker of Indian Army and threw grenades inside. After one of his fighters Qudratullah lost his life, he was able to kidnap an injured officer of the Indian Army. That was not the end. He slit the throat of the kidnapped officer.

He came back to Pakistan with the head of the dead Indian Army officer in his bag and presented this head to top Army officials and later on to the then Army Chief General Pervez Musharraf, who gave him a cash award of rupees one lakh.

The pictures of Ilyas Kashmiri with the head of a dead Indian Army officer in his hands were published in some Pakistani newspapers and he became very important among the Kashmiri militants. Maulana Zahoor Ahmad Alvi of Jamia Muhammadiyah, Islamabad, issued a fatwa in support of slitting the throats of Indian Army officers. Those were the days when Corps Commander, Rawalpindi, Lt Gen Mehmood

Ahmad, visited the training camp of Ilyas Kashmiri in Kotli and appreciated his frequent guerilla actions against the Indian Army.

His honeymoon with the Pakistan Army generals was over after the creation of Jaish-e-Muhammad. Gen Mehmood wanted Ilyas Kashmiri to join JeM and accept Maulana Masood Azhar as his leader but the one eyed militant refused to do so. The militants of JeM once attacked the training camp of Ilyas Kashmiri in Kotli but he survived that attack. His outfit was banned by Musharraf after 9/11. He was arrested after an attack on the life of Pervez Musharraf in December 2003. He was tortured during the interrogation.

The United Jihad Council led by Syed Salahuddin strongly protested the arrest of Ilyas Kashmiri and on the pressure of Kashmiri militants, Ilyas Kashmiri was released in February 2004. He was a shattered man after his release. He disassociated himself from the Kashmiri militants and remained silent for at least three years.

It was the Lal Masjid operation in July 2007, which totally changed Ilyas Kashmiri. He moved to North Waziristan where he spent many years as a Jihad instructor. This area was full of his friends and sympathisers. He reorganized his 313 Brigade and joined hands with the Taliban but he was never close to al-Qaeda leadership. He attracted many former Pakistan Army officers to join hands with him. The strength of 313 Brigade in North Waziristan was more than 3,000. Most of his fighters were hired from the Punjab, Sindh and Azad Kashmir.

It is alleged that he organised many terrorist attacks in different areas of Pakistan, including the assassination of Major General (retd) Faisal Alvi in Rawalpindi. Alvi was also from the SSG and he led the first-ever Army operation in North Waziristan in 2004.

Kashmiri planned attacks on Alvi on the demand of Taliban in

North Waziristan. Sources close to his family have yet not confirmed his death in a US drone attack but there is no doubt that Ilyas Kashmiri was actually a creation of the Pakistani establishment like Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi of the banned LeT.

The Pakistani establishment abandoned and arrested most of these militant leaders without realising that they had followers all over Pakistan and they could create problems for Pakistan anytime. The establishment is still without any policy about all those who were once declared “freedom fighters” and were honored by the top Army officials like Pervez Musharraf.